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Linework

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Linework

Dave Felton

M. A. Seton Hall University, 2016

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts

In

The Department of English

Seton Hall University

May, 2016

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Approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Svenvold', written over a horizontal line.

Professor Mark Svenvold, Thesis Advisor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cara Blue Adams', written over a horizontal line.

Professor Cara Blue Adams, Second Reader

Introduction

Working for the phone company for over twenty years doesn't sound like a career that would lend itself to the literary life or offer many poetic moments to fuel creative thought. In those years- my entire adulthood to date- I left little room for the workplace experience to enter into the art I was intent on making: the poems, short stories, comic strips, and illustrations done at night and weekends. For many years I was ashamed of my blue collar background and ignored it in any aspect I could, denying it a place in my datebooks, diaries, and sketchbooks. My day job as a field technician was a necessary evil, I thought, that I determined would not define me- my co-workers joked that I became "alive at five," quitting time when I'd kick the dirt from my boots and forget the phone company until the next day.

In hindsight, I see the missed opportunities to cross-pollinate these two sides of existence: day and night, work and art. Facets of the workplace experience began to first appear in the small sketchbooks I carried in my pocket each day, in which I caught spare moments on paper, drawing scenes of the urban neighborhoods I worked- store fronts, street corners, empty factories- followed by more detailed images of the machines I worked on and the tools I carried into company basements. These drawings grounded me in places and moments that have become, I realize, increasingly transitory, for within the next few years I expect my job function at the phone company will be entirely obsolete.

When I met with Professor Senvold to discuss possible subjects for a thesis project, thinking at the time to do poems on New Jersey history or local graveyards, I brought along a selection of drawings done at work and expressed my desire to eventually illustrate the collection. Looking through those drawings, he immediately knew the direction my project should go- poems of the workplace. It made sudden perfect sense- it was a subject that, with my vantage point as a senior tech in a declining utility, only I could write, imagining myself witness and attendant to the demise of the phone company. For the

first time in my career I began to actively write about *work*- splicing copper cables, installing and repairing telephone lines- and of the men I spent my days with. When the nine-to-five job becomes fodder for poems, *work* suddenly takes on a sense of play and art.

To help generate ideas, I began a “work journal” to collect notes to draw upon as source material. Instead of sketching a machine I’d worked on, I tried using words to capture its likeness on paper, paying attention to concrete images, sensory perceptions and possible similes to capture that moment and subject. Even if these sketches didn’t evolve into a Modernist poem in their own right, I remained conscious of the aim to “make it new,” to portray equipment and material as something that exists and suggest intended functions, to take overlooked and unseen objects of infrastructure and set it apart, calling attention to it through language. If these exercises wouldn’t become poems, they often led to something else, conjuring up past memories to reflect upon or raise speculation about what’s next- the next job, the next day, the next poem, or the interconnection between all three. For instance, an overheard conversation became the subject for “T Minus One Year, Two Hundred and Fifty-Six Days.” As technology changes, so has the local workplace and the whole direction of the company, and with morale deteriorating, some associates count down their projected retirement dates still years away, looking forward to that future as jailed inmates must anticipate parole. As a mirror poem, it shifts midway upon itself to reflect the first half, though the lengthening of the line bears its repetition, offering the reader new meaning.

Hearing that I often spent my lunchbreak drawing urban areas of my job locations, Professor Svenvold reminded me of Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*, written during the walks O’Hara took on his lunch hour. With that in mind, I set out on walks through downtown Paterson to discover my own “lunch poems,” noting names of pawn shops and beauty parlors on Main Street, its rusted newspaper machines and cracked sidewalks setting the tone for my urban pastoral, “Meditations from a Manhole,” which was inspired by Philip Levine’s “A Walk with Tom Jefferson,” a meditation poem read in Svenvold’s Advanced

Poetry this semester. As a utility worker in the city's manholes, I imagined myself the intimacy a tiny mite would have with the sleeping giant found in William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*. The streets had a history to them, and working in the underground beneath them, I felt closer to that past as I maintained telephone cables that were placed in the early Twentieth Century when Paterson was still known as Silk City. In writing my own meditation, I drew upon two poetic modes encountered in class: the pastoral and the elegy. For the city of Paterson, however, the poem became an urban pastoral, in which I sought lyrical songlike praise for areas of industry and business and for my own work site and tools of trade. I also attempted to evoke different voices- that of former co-workers and of urban myths- and in recounting a former partner, I slipped into a sort of elegy for old Mike Richardson, who retired and passed away some few years later, but who is remembered by co-workers and by the tools he left behind, still in use today.

As I engaged with the workplace on paper, I struggled with an atmosphere that I'd taken for granted- the mundane and the banal aspects of everyday life, and it's tiny victories and defeats- and to break out of the frustration I used attentive writing practice that I'd discovered in William Stafford's process of morning pages, and the details that emerged found their way into the poems "After Another is Fired," "The Poetry of (This) Place," and particularly "Daylight Savings Time," drawn from pages written before I readied for work. That morning, the present moment was compressed with headlines drawn from televised news- a derailed train, a sinking tugboat in the Hudson- to form a sort of composite poem that Tony Hoagland recognize as "a strategy capable of joining the field of personal subjectivity to worldly knowledge." I wanted both the personal and the public sphere of life in there.

Along with the class texts that provided models and inspiration for my Thesis project was Suzanne Bottelli's chapbook *The Feltville Formation*, recommended by Professor Senvold, which inspired me to craft poems from found documents. The phone company is bloated with paper records and handbooks, and every lineman's truck has multiple copies of safety guides, field practices, and union contracts, and appropriating the technical language of such books would be a way to immerse myself in that language

and find its own poetry. “Instruction” contrasts directions for a customer’s install to the installers themselves, young men floundering with inexperience and hungover from the night before, looking at a career if they can make it through that day, while “The Personal Choice Each Individual Must Make” is drawn from a company letter sent to employees after they left the job to strike. Bottelli’s chapbook and Michael Morse’s *Void and Compensation* featured an end section of notes about appropriate poems, and following their model, I too have put together a page of notes about some of the poems.

A collection of workplace poems such as this would not be complete if it failed to include labor issues, and just as this project aligned perfectly with my interest and ability, the writing of some poems occurred during The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers’ strike against Verizon in April 2016. Seton Hall University was fortunate enough to have the Poet Laureate of the United States, Juan Felipe Herrera, speak earlier that month, and during a special workshop given on campus, Herrera addressed the poet’s concern to speak and write poetry of engagement. “How do we direct our lives right now, as writers, as thinkers, and as human beings?” he asked. “I think the first step is to care, even though we feel helpless, or to notice that we *can* do something.” When it came time to write about scab workers that crossed picket lines, I purposely avoided condemnation and indignation, and instead reached towards the natural world to help express what both sides must feel in the poem “Migration Patterns.”

This collection of poems- so aptly titled *Linework* by Professor Senvold, as it alludes to the placing of telephone cables, the writing of poems, and the drawing in my sketchbooks- has become a celebration of not only my own career but also my associates’, many of whom I’ve lost contact with over time as they retired, and with the changing technology and economy, the job I’m writing about in some aspects is no longer here, so in places I find this project a love letter to Ma Bell, and in others an elegy for a career that has ceased to exist in the way I remember it.

But I do remember, and in remembering, I write.

“The reinvention of daily life means marching off the edge of our maps.”

--Bob Black, *The Abolition of Work*

“I hear you singin' in the wire.”

-“Wichita Lineman,” Glen Campbell

Radio Song

The grease slip of motor and the day dies
Like a song turned static as we pass under and on.
All paychecked and penuried gather and press forward,
Some push or fall or run,
An alcohol sting on tongue and skinned knees.
The union meeting gone bad
Spoiled by sun and softness and
Coughed curses from lunged machines,
Smoke clings to our hairy jowls,
Prayers start to remember us sinners
Who forget and beget.
“Ey, man, can I bum one,” starts a story,
A nicotine dream between monk and madman.
“I came close to finding god, man,”
And clutched my arm stronger than any sermon could.

Found dead in his car,
I couldn’t believe the storied surfaces
A failed mystic left in his wake-
A high-heeled boyfriend who’d called 911
And left two widows.

And as this life-
This human thing we shed
Like skin, like clothes, like tears--
It is done for, a real goner,
So rain taps a rhythm
On my windshield and the radio finds
Reception and someone’s song is sung again.

Linework

Rockwell's "The Lineman"

On the foreman's wall hangs a print:

Norman Rockwell's painting, "The Lineman."

Each morning men sit under
that print without notice or care
as they wait for their day's work,
sharing curses and dick jokes and
scores from last night's game and
swear they could coach a better one
for that kinda money.

Above them the print yellows under
plastic, black paint flakes from the frame
against a sheetrock wall pocked by
bootmarks where the men lean.

For an image painted seventy years ago,
it is remarkably modern.

Linemen wear the same canvas overalls,
leather gloves, climbing belt, and strap
identical gaffs to their boots to climb,
they sweat the same sweat
pull splinters of Douglas Fir from their
arms as linemen did at day's end.

Rockwell found his model, John Tooley, on
the job, digging and setting poles with his
crew under the Vermont sun. After the
work day, Toolan posed in Rockwell's backyard
where a pole had been set and a cable tied
between sugar maples, whose fallen leaves
matched Tooley's flannel shirt. Below,
a photographer snapped angled shots for
reference and an assistant held reflective panels
like cue cards upward at the man atop the pole.
Tooley's own foreman was there, proud.

After, the artist and lineman shared a smoke.
Between them stretched a vision like
cables guyed to innumerable poles
humming with energy and voices that
no storm could ever silence for long.

The men sit under Tooley's image each day
don't see themselves as that icon,
are blind to their shared heritage.
They might not be that yellowed print,
the foreman knows, nor even the

chipped frame around it. Instead,

they're more like the nail behind the

frame that fixes the picture to the wall.

Unseen, but there. Always holding, climbing,

clutching, mounting hardware, slinging wire,

pulling splinters and hard time.

Beeper Codes

It used to be beepers that called them off to work
which gave them time to pay the bill,
sober up and make stories for wives
Before heading back to their trucks.

Out of coffee shops and street corner bars
They'd straighten up and buckle in.
Safety lights flashed near the job, yellow beacons
Like flares on shore to warn away the ships.

Their beepers chirped and vibrated with codes that told
Which was more urgent: an old woman
Without her phone or a fire alarm
That just went off without a cause.
911- you had to call home;
935- where for lunch?
And the 458 engraved on the inside
Of my wedding band from the days
My girlfriend beeped "I love you."

When Moe's went off each month he jumped higher

Than his belly should've allowed-

That code meant his wife was ovulating and

Hot to have him home to try to knock her up.

If they could do it while on the clock

he thought he'd someday brag his kid was union-made.

Meditation from a Manhole

When the space between buildings grows too cold
To cruise Main Street with windows open
And the crabgrass ceases to wrestle a way between sidewalk and curb
And storefront mannequins don parkas, their faces haggard and chipped,
It is the season to go underground and work below the street.
Cool in the summer, warm in the winter,
Hidden from bullet and beggar, I climb down into Paterson,
Its crack, a hole of brick and mud and age
And lay into the leaden cables down there, weighed by iron cases
And generations of disuse.
Winter is cleaner here- less sweat, the grease become dust,
The waters recede to leave a hard orange grime
That one chips away with hammer and chisel.
There, lead tags made by guys who have come before-
What did they find here that's lost to me?
Whatever they found, it can't be ordered from the tool catalog
Or found in the vending machine back at the garage.
If they tried to ingrain it in me my first day on the job,
And bind it like pages of a handbook,
I never knew it. I missed.

Let's not blame old Mike Richardson,
Who introduced me to the underground,

For I was to be its caretaker,
The junior guy given the shitty work.
Some guys liked the hood, I knew,
For the food, the bars, the women
The sleeping in your truck,
The knowing the boss would never drive down to see you.
Beware the haunted manhole on Market, they said,
And its ghost voices that lure children away.
Stay out of the River Street run, too.
Where sewer alligators the size of your leg
Live and swim beneath the bottom cables-
That's where Captain Phil lost three fingers!
And the underground along Eastside Park
Inhabited by a tribe of albinos-
You need an extra guy for backup
And a cop escort, and insurance money.
Our first day together, I asked Old Mike,
So where's these monsters and ghosts,
and he waved his hand out the truck's window.
"Ain't no ghosts but rats and roaches
Sittin' on logs of shit down here
Afraid of drownin' and dyin' like us all."
Old Mike's been gone fifteen years now-
Some of the tools on my truck used to be his.

Left behind, "bequeathed," a word from
The daily crossword puzzle he did
Over a cardboard cup of coffee and
A smoke each morning.
Foil wrappers still gild sidewalks
Where he once parked.

Old phone cables, sagged into place,
There's no moving them without ratchet and chain,
And cranking them means cracking them,
And for that there's solder and torch,
And as I heat up the lead, mud flares to a fine ash
That glows before it blows upward toward day.
No ghost down here, no rat, no roach,
Cleaner than some streets above.
Ten feet below the street,
I know this city in unseen ways,
Have touched it as a surgeon's blade to tumor,
A spade's edge to worm, a drill to wood grain.
To this slumbered giant, am I
An unitchable itch in its eye,
The charley horse in its thigh,
A twitching nerve, a phantom pain,
A ringing in its ears that never dims?

All these things I've made mine.
I'm looking for where a six hundred meets a nine,
And the tape job on that stub bothers me-
All the tape on the truck won't fix that-
And I'm half listening to my partner in the street above
Dealing with people who stop for our flashing lights and cones
For a look down the hole.
"You fixin' our TV?" a kid asks, and
My partner says, "No, dialtone,"
And the kid's like, "What's that?"
All he knows is cell signal, Wi-Fi, 3G and LTE,
And I feel the fossils around me cringe
In the earth, unexcavated and exasperated,
Sleepy under the city's weight and drone,
Kept company by rodent and bug,
Insects that surface once every seventeen years-
Which is longer than some guys get for retirement-
And I think, it's not much longer now,
I'll miss this when it's gone,
A life fashioned from copper and lead and dirt,
And I press myself against the cool brick wall of the manhole
Like an unborn babe listening in its womb
For the world to speak its name.

The Poetry of (This) Place

*Go to the ant, you sluggard;
Consider its ways and be wise.*

--Proverbs 6:6

I've looked and I've tried to see it
But it's just not here.
There's plenty of garbage and junk and
There's plenty of bullshit
But when I want to say something
About where I go for eight hours each day,
Something poetic,
I can only stare at the gummed tiles of the office floor
And the ant that is trudging across the room-
If he's seen, someone will stomp his ass
Without any existential hesitation.

I'm reminded of my first year of summer camp-
The kids found a Daddy long-legs on the bus
And one bastard pulled each leg off until
All that was left was a little round body
He held for amusement.
It couldn't scream or twitch or do anything
Other than sit there and take it.

The ant runs the gauntlet this morning.
At least he's still running.
All I do is sit there and take it.

The Man's Gone Missing

When the wire becomes snagged and no flip or shake will free it
 I descend the ladder and yank it along to raise between house and pole
 And climb the tree between to fish it through its branches.
 The tools in my belt both pull down and push in my side
 Like a yoke fastened and prod by unseen masters.
They don't pay me enough for this- the sap on hand,
 The rip in jacket, the jab of stick- things done gladly in boyhood.

Just when, then, did I get old?
 Once I'd climb my grandfather's pine with my brother,
 Who, smaller, found ways upward that were inaccessible to me.
He goes too high, I thought, *he risks too much*,
 And yet we climbed higher to hide and sit quiet when grandfather
 Came out to call us home.
 If we made no sound and gave no answer,
 We might never be made to come down and leave.

The homeowner comes outside and walks around the front yard
 To check my work and finds my ladder propped against his house
 But I've gone missing.
Hello, he calls and looks from house to street
 Without thinking to look up the tree where I sit
 For the moment and I stay still.
 Is there a *too high* and *too much* when there's no voice to answer?

As the tree sways in an unfelt wind, my fingers tighten
 Around the nearest branch like the roots that stretch
 Downward and around stony soil,

Seeking something more steadfast than itself
Through my plastic hardhat, I feel
The stare of my brother's shade atop my skull
Knowing
I might never be made to come down and leave.

Daylight Savings Time

Shadows slide across bedroom ceilings when
Cars coast down the street with wipers and headlights on,

Coffee machines sputter and cough in kitchens,
Waking dogs who stand by back doors to go out into yards.

All those co-workers must be stirring and brewing
And letting dogs out and reading headlines on news apps,

Televisions on for local weather: cold and rainy-
A good day to sit in the truck with the heat on.

By now, a tugboat has settled on a river bottom,
The shriek of a derailed train fades as

The passengers carried away blame the dark
And the stolen hour and all the hope they lost with it.

Dark in the car except for the wrong time.
Still dark at work when the defeat creeps in

Like fog across the watershed marsh,
The chant of frogcroak to a dawning sky

Like the voices we use to curse the work
And the lateshift that will hold our light instead.

After Another is Fired This Week

Tools once coveted and stolen
Today cast in corner heaps.
The office tenanted by the unwanted:
Dull hacksaws and rusted cutters,
Dead batteries and used safety glasses,
Crimpers and fusers and keys to who-knows-what-and-where.
On the desk, a printed graph charts productivity;
So much is in the red.
Photocopies of lottery tickets pinned to the wall
Name all the lifelong losers here.
Locked drawers slide open now,
And the secrets are nothing special:
Pills for heartburn, pills for headaches,
A collection of pen caps separated from their bodies,
Too many paperclips.
Pushed in the back of the drawer,
Where only I could have found it,
A laminated photo of a woman and three children,
Paper crowns atop their heads at a restaurant.
A handwritten epitaph in marker:
My inspiration to bull forward everyday.

Whose handwriting is this? Whose faces?
The items in the desk worthless,
I fall into the shape left in someone's chair
And swivel toward the window
To put the shadow I cast behind me.

T Minus One Year, Two Hundred and Fifty-Six Days

They count their days left to this job,
An app keeps time or takes it away.

They're too eager to be done with this;
It's like wishing their lives away.

Is this unique to these phonemen?
Conscious of their inconsequence,

They shrug and wait like pets left home.
“It won't be a job worth having,”

They say, knowing, though, there are worse
Ways to live.

Yet they return each day with books that advise

Better ways to live,
Knowing, always, many have it worse.

It won't just be a job anymore-
It'll be a thing worth having,

For a change.

They shrug and wait like their pets left home,

Conscious of their inconsequence-

Is that unique?

Perhaps to these phonemen, it's as futile as wishing-

Their lives often away, ever an elsewhere,

Always too eager to be done with this,

With their apps that keep time... or take it.

And away they count,

Their days left to this job,

The ones already given and spent

And the ones they still have in hand.

Instructions from the Manual

Take the unit from its wrapping

Place it against the house

Use an awl to mark screw location

Mount with the hardware provided.

Don't look over your shoulder for help.

The other guy is hungover at the van.

Follow these instructions to make it

Through a day.

Terminate the number twelve ground wire

Run it to the electrical panel.

Bond the wires with a ground clamp.

Mark with a yellow plastic tag.

Boss wants to see it by the book.

Doesn't like you much- can you tell?

If it makes you feel better- and it will-

Write shit about him. Everyone does.

Incise the rubber grommet.

Push the service wire into the unit.

Strip the sheath back with the pull string

Cut away the excess with your shears.

Your shears missing from your toolbelt?

Walk back to the van where your buddy is sick

He's puked his inner self into the street

And stares at the stuff he's made of.

Comp the Tickets Before Contract Talks Break Down

Below the Erskine streets, compressors power down
For quarterly routines: filters and contacts changed,
Humidity sensors replaced, air pisses from pinholed pipes
Hissing from cobwebbed corners, where husks of dead insects
Bear witness to functions and tasks outdated, outmoded.

Dust from insulation make the hands and lung itch.
Cough and cough again.
Curse and curse again when the screw slips through
Thread or finger, motherfuck the machine and the
CEO and this GPS. A text makes it through on a weak signal:
“Call center with approximate time left on the job.”
Halfway through thirty, and they’re looking
For it to be over sooner.

Migration Patterns

There are trucks in New Jersey
Driven by men from Kentucky
With license plates from Indiana, Florida, and Tennessee-
All right-to-work states-
Modern migrant workers
Holed up in highway motels at weekly rates,
Running three thousand feet of strand
In eighteen hour days
For six thousand a week-
Five times what the company paid the guys
On the picket line when the job was theirs to do.

But they don't have the beautiful plumage
Of the modern migrant,
Nor their melodic whistle song
Heard as wire spools uncoil and fly
Through pulleys of chain blocks,
Lashing wire silver spun,
Drive hooks hammered in
Poles to weep tarry creosote tears.

Follow the wire scraps and tire skids
And if the hour is your friend
You might catch sight of a pair
Mid-ladder or mid-span at dusk
Silhouetted against the Meadowland glow
Before the ratification and rate hike
Startles them to take wing
And leave all dispute behind.

The Personal Choice Each Individual Must Make

In the event of a future,
Acts would constitute just cause,
So do so knowing the vastness-
We want to answer questions.

Consider such an action-
to stop and strike-
To maintain a focus on the facts,
For they will judge.

Even having followed proper procedure,
View that as much as we may,
Everything ends...
We hope.

Calls Made from Rest Stop Payphones

There used to be a row of phone booths
Under the closest light, and they would sometimes
Ring unexpectedly. When you pick one up
You hear only clicks of crab claws among a
Surf of static, and you might then look to the night sky
To catch the stars reconfiguring themselves.

There are walls I signed and left my mark upon,
And there are faces I'd remember if you said their names.
Read them aloud before you leave the stall.
Let the echoes stir the paper and dust
And see what's flushed out of hiding:
A turned word, a spoken glance,
A judgment call made collect.

When I wrote your number above a turnpike urinal
I hated that I still remembered it,
Had failed to erase and deface it.
Let another crank call love and
Wake from a rest stop coma.

The phone booths and their flickering night lights,
The shackled yellow pages and their dead insects are gone.
I've lost yet another place to seek change:
It got there before I did.
When my cellphone rattles in my pocket,
The stars don't shift, and it's never your voice
On the other end.

Ladder

Carried on shoulder
Balanced like a scale,
The self a fulcrum
To weigh act and decision-

Unknot and pull its rope
To extend range and reach
Beyond every arm grasp
And length of human hold.

Set afoot and topple
Its height forward to
The wall, the side, the trunk,
The loft, the attic, or top bunk.

Hand over hand,
The rungs held,
Body hoisted,
A career of taken steps-

Climbing utility poles,
Descending into manholes,
To raise and splice cable,
Bolt and brace iron cases,

Extension cords run
From pony-motored generator

Fire up impact drills,
Light up dark spaces.

At the highest rung,
A dizzied, exalted end-
How many then find their ladder
Propped against the wrong wall?

To save face and time,
Is it better to climb back down
And begin again,
Or just let go, push off,
and fall?

The Zen of Telephone Repair

Overhead lines that once twitched with talk
Hang there and sway.
Today, by gravity; tomorrow, in storm.

Before the underground is safe for entry,
Purge and ventilate, and
Calibrate the monitors for continuous
Tests.

Make ready the site and the self,
And ease into a slow descent.
Avoid fines and resign-
It's won't impede
any ability of return.
Sign and seal and send it, but
Make a copy and
Keep it.

The chainlink chime of toolbags
Set down in driveways
Always wake the sleeping dogs.
"There is only this,"
Is what I hear through the window.
"And this. And this."

Notes

“Rockwell’s Lineman”- This poem was inspired by the reference photos Norman Rockwell used to paint “The Lineman” in 1947, an image commissioned by New England Telephone and appeared as advertisements in *Life* magazine. The photos are part of a digital archive maintained by The Norman Rockwell Museum. The painting, owned by Verizon, was donated to the Museum in 2008.

“Daylight Savings Time”- Written the first workday of Daylight Savings 2016, the news referred to in this poem are the sinking of the tugboat *The Specialist* on March 12th and the Amtrak derailment in Kansas on March 14th of that year.

“T Minus One Year, Two Hundred and Fifty-Six Days”- The app used by co-workers was *T-Zero Countdown Timer* by Dan Wesnor.

“The Personal Choice Each Individual Must Make”- These lines were extracted and rearranged from a document sent by Verizon in April 2016 to 40,000 CWA and IBEW associates. This company letter contained instructions on how to resign from the union and cross picket lines.